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ABSTRACT

The special language of particular occupations, the role playing of those who practice them, and the terms in which the communications media and the general public refer to them evoke problematic cognitions about occupational functions and practitioner traits that determine an occupation's high or low social standing. Perceptions of occupations rest heavily on stereotypes that are often class based and occur in sets, each stereotypic feature connoting others in the set as well. Race, ethnicity, sex, class subculture, level of attractiveness and kind of personality are common components of such sets. Linguistic evocations encourage a focus upon the special procedures of high prestige occupations rather than on the achievement of demonstrable results, which are expected from low prestige occupations. The various levels of the occupational hierarchy systematically reinforce each other's high or low standing and also systematically legitimize inequalities in the allocation of values in society as a whole. (Author/TA)

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# THE SYMBOLIC EVOCATION OF OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE

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May 1976

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## Abstract

The special language of particular occupations, the dramaturgy of those who practice them, and the terms in which the communications media and the general public refer to them evoke problematic cognitions about the functions of occupations and the traits of their practitioners that rationalize their high or low social standing.

Perceptions of occupations rest heavily on stereotypes that are often class based and that occur in sets, each stereotypic feature connoting others in the set as well. Race, ethnicity, sex, class subculture, level of attractiveness and kind of personality are common components of such constellations.

Linguistic evocations encourage a focus upon the esoteric procedures of high prestige occupations rather than on their successes or failure in achieving their ostensible goals. The various levels of the occupational hierarchy systematically reinforce each other's high or low standing and also systematically legitimize inequalities in the allocation of values in the society as a whole.

The Symbolic Evocation of Occupational Prestige

Linda Burzotta Nilson and Murray Edelman

The discovery that people rank occupations according to their "social standing" in a roughly uniform way has intrigued sociologists for more than three decades. Explanations of occupational prestige have focused largely upon educational and skill requirements, the setting in which role occupants perform, and the "functional necessity" of the occupation. We consider here the contribution to occupational prestige of language and gestures that condense widespread fears and hopes in a particular culture. Whatever their other functions may be, the special language of particular occupations, the dramaturgy of those who practice them, and the terms in which the communications media and the general public refer to them evoke problematic cognitions about the functions of occupations and the traits of their practitioners that rationalize their high or low social standing.

Because it appears that symbolic evocations are especially influential in establishing the prestige levels of the occupations that rank highest and lowest, symbols are particularly important in explaining such indirect effects of occupational status as wide inequalities in social power and privilege and in quality of life (Feldman and Thielbar, 1972). Our analysis also suggests some nonobvious ways in which high and low level occupations reinforce each other's prestige rankings and jointly legitimate the authoritative allocation of unequal values.

As already noted, the prestige scale has customarily been explained in terms of other scales or dimensions of occupations which correlate with prestige. These correlates include such social and economic

factors as income, intrinsic rewards, educational requirements, special skills, scarcity of talent, the formality of training, the cleanliness of the work, office or factory setting, and the "functional necessity" of different occupations (Davis and Moore, 1945; Caplow, 1954; Palmer, 1953; Hodge, Siegel, and Rossi, 1964). When presented with the various justifications, respondents say that their prestige ratings are based on their perceptions of an occupation's relative responsibility, service to community, training and skill, and autonomy (Simpson and Simpson, 1960; Reiss, 1961; Goldthorpe and Hope, 1975). Social psychologists Veroff and Feld (1970) explain prestige as the publicly recognized achievement potential of occupations, while psychologist Atkinson (1964) argues that it is directly related to the difficulty and risk associated with various jobs.

All of these proposed explanations are subject to question and are sometimes unable to accomodate inconsistent findings. Correlates in themselves are not descriptive of the process of value formation that is at the heart of prestige evaluations. It is not clear whether most people have a sound grasp of income and educational statistics regarding occupations. This is especially doubtful for high school students, who already have a good grasp of the prestige scale (Turner, 1964); and the trades, which require long years of training, are not particularly prestigious. While functional necessity has always been a fuzzy concept (Tumin, 1963) it fails to explain why agriculture, certainly the most necessary work in a community, is accorded such low prestige. Kriesberg (1962) found that the prestige evaluations of dentists are unrelated to raters' perceptions of the quality of dental work, the scarcity of required skills, or the social characteristics of dentists.

The only relationship worth noting was between people's ratings of dentists and their ratings of other professional occupations. Nor is risk to clients the key factor either, for a bus driver can easily kill his or her riders.

A realistic explanation of occupational prestige must account for the ambivalence that often appears prominently in survey responses and in behavior. While high prestige entails respect, it seems also to arouse feelings of resentment and disrespect. Centers (1949) found that almost half of his large sample of working class and rural white-collar workers thought doctors and lawyers make too much money. Those who accord physicians the highest prestige ratings also express the greatest hostility toward them (Gamson and Schuman, 1963). Critiquing the functionalist viewpoint, Cohn (1960) proposed an ambivalence hypothesis respecting the prestige of physicians: their high status comes not only from their charismatic role of helping people but from the lucrative business aspect of the profession, which evokes both respect and resentment. Here we see the utility of Rodman's (1963) conception of the "lower class value stretch" and of Parkin's (1971) subordinate value system. Both of these frameworks address themselves to the ambivalence experienced by members of the lower class, who look longingly, indifferently, and enviously at the rewards of the more privileged class.

An even more basic complication in evaluating prestige is inherent in the methodology of the major studies. Typically, as in the NORC studies, the probing question is phrased ambiguously. People are asked to give their idea of the general social standing of a list of occupations. Have they been asked to give a factual report about the values they see in the society or a normative expression of their

personal views? Gusfield and Schwartz (1963) suggest that prestige scales are an inextricable mixture of both elements. When their sample of students evaluated occupations on a Semantic Differential instrument, several factual and normative items correlated very highly with prestige. The most discriminating factual items pertained to class (middle class-working class, Democrat-Republican, rich-poor), and the strongest normative dimensions were dirty-clean and successful-unsuccessful. Gusfield and Schwartz believe that factual items are dominant, overriding the normative components.

We agree that people are probably expressing their perceptions of societal values more than their own reservations, especially on questions as ambiguous as those in the NORC survey. There is no opportunity in such a study for the expression of ambivalent feelings about occupations. Attitudinal surveys in general tend to tap only the dominant value system (Parkin, 1971), not ambivalence, latency, or complexity in cognitive structures. Occupational prestige is an abstract value set, moreover, removed from the concrete problems of daily life. There is usually much greater consensus across a society on abstract issues than on concrete ones (Rodman, 1963; Edelman, forthcoming). Abstract values are seldom questioned or abandoned because they are so unspecific and so are not challenged by everyday experiences. Yet abstract symbols form much of the basis for social integration and political acquiescence (Edelman, 1964). Much of the agreement across subgroups regarding the occupational prestige scale, then, is an illusory product of the level of abstraction of scale items. It does not necessarily point to genuine consensus in individual rankings of occupational prestige.

But the questions remain: Why is there such high agreement among people's perceptions of societal values? It is likely that prestige evaluations are a mixture of factual and normative elements, and that they represent a general consensus respecting the distinctive character of different occupations and the abstract values they produce. What accounts for agreement on this abstract value-set? We must also consider the genesis of the subordinate value-set, the reservations and resentments regarding the prestige scale. How is this ambivalence developed and how do people continue indefinitely to live with it? Because the value dimensions underlying prestige rest partly upon some nonobvious symbolic forms, they are worthy of study.

## The Perceptual Foundations

The dominant value system is the "official" ideology and the justification for reward inequality of a society. It is promulgated through mass institutions--the school system and the mass media. People not only learn it; at one level the vast majority subscribes to it with a greater or lesser degree of commitment because it is the only cohesive, society-wide ideology disseminated to them. Reservations respecting this framework are localized or privatized and are accorded no such degree of legitimacy in mass institutions (Parkin, 1971).

Through the process of taking the role of the "generalized other," people learn to perceive the way society perceives (Mead, 1934) or, more accurately, the way they think society perceives. It is on this foundation that people graft the exceptions and qualifications that

they draw from their ties to more specific reference groups. Prestige is a perceptual phenomenon, and perceptions are based on the meanings symbols evoke. The objective characteristics of occupations are not crucial in themselves, though they may become so if they are selected as meaningful in the dominant value system. Thus the relative difficulty, risk, achievement potential, or importance of occupations, to the extent that such dimensions can be measured, are not the salient issues. The perceived difficulty, risk, achievement potential, and importance of different jobs are critical, but that formulation calls attention to the need to specify what accounts for such perceptions. It is revealing that some dimensions of occupations that are in relatively short supply do not serve as justifications for prestige and sometimes undermine it: danger to the incumbent and physical strength, for example.

Symbolic Sources of Prestige

The relationships among a value-set, its justifications, and its consequences are complex and not easily disentangled. People do not necessarily examine their evaluative beliefs for logical inconsistencies, especially when the beliefs are abstract and have little bearing on their daily lives.

No doubt one source of prestige perceptions is the material rewards associated with occupations. People see prestige as a justification for reward inequalities (Feldman and Thielbar, 1972). At the same time, the symbols of material affluence are a source of prestige in themselves, even when the sources of this affluence are unknown. In her study of fifth and sixth graders in a Midwestern community,

Neugarten (1946) found that upper and upper middle-class children were perceived by their peers to rate high on traits such as good looks, liking for school, leadership, friendship, and other favorable characteristics. On the same dimensions, lower class children were rated low. Status symbols are bases of prestige precisely because of this circular reasoning process.

Capitalist societies, especially the United States, tend not to support the egalitarian ideology (Huber and Form, 1973). At least in the dominant value framework, most people think that a person receives materially about what he or she deserves (Huber and Form, 1973). Occupation is generally regarded as a status of achievement rather than a status of ascription or consumption, although occupational attainment involves all three elements. This ideological complex shapes the way people experience occupations in real life and in the mass media. Even children see real or portrayed incumbents of high prestige occupations--physicians, lawyers, political figures, big businessmen, scientists--surrounded by material symbols of success (large houses, expensive cars, formal dress, polished appearance). Incumbents of progressively lower prestige jobs are found or are dramatized in correspondingly less enhancing, less affluent milieux. When possible, advertisers exploit and reinforce this perceptual structure by associating their products with representatives of the high prestige group. Since most information from both the real world and the mass media are processed by people as "maintenance messages" (Weibe, 1971; Edelman, 1971), people do not ordinarily question the legitimacy of the reward structure presented them. It is merely assumed that inequality is based on some notion of social justice. We will

discuss this dimension of justice shortly. In summary, we propose that reward inequality helps to explain prestige inequality, not just the other way around.

Aside from the circular reasoning involving the reward structure, what are other sources of occupational prestige and how are they symbolically conveyed in a convincing way? We argue that there are such dimensions underlying the prestige scale because the very labelling of occupations creates the impression of an essential uniqueness in each job. Categorization is inherent in the nature of language and in the process of perception. Each occupational label carries a set of associations, many of them value laden, that is directly learned or extrapolated from previous learning. These sets have differential values along at least two basic dimensions we will develop here.

Let us look to history to trace the most basic reactions people have had to early occupational specialties. The first occupation to gain quasi-professional or specially privileged status in the community was the shaman, or medicine man (Lenski, 1966; Moore, 1970). He allegedly manipulated spiritual forces to increase the survival chances of the community and individuals and to promote justice. Various priestly groups with institutionalized privileges and obligations in more complex societies later superseded the shaman. But even in the earliest societies, prestige accrued to those who displayed supernatural powers with some observable results, in spite of or because of the inexplicability of the powers and results. People stand in greatest awe of phenomena they do not, or feel they cannot, understand when those phenomena are severely threatening or strongly reassuring; hence the awe of magic, religion, and science.

There are at least two dimensions underlying the prestige of shamans and their occupational descendants. First, the occupant of the role is believed to have superhuman abilities. He is a special kind of person with understandings and skills others cannot imitate. Second, the kind of knowledge he claims is believed to be legitimate but is not understood by others. It is not understood because it is not possible to reduce decision-making to any program that laymen can grasp, though it is generally assumed that occupants of these roles possess arcane skills or knowledge that enable them to achieve desirable results. Because people cannot understand their procedures or the source of their skill, they feel ill equipped to judge his competence. The strong need to believe he can cope with crucial phenomena others do not understand encourages people to read success into ambiguous results. Here is another instance of circular reasoning with important consequences.

Occupational prestige is a phenomenon based in tradition. The scale has shown high consistency during the twentieth century (Counts, 1923; Hodge, Siegel, and Rossi, 1964), and we have reason to believe that comparable occupations have changed little in rank for many, many centuries (Lenski, 1966). There is little reason to suppose that the bases of prestige have changed much since the most primitive societies.

Occupational Stereotypes in the Mass Culture

Even when the product or service an occupation provides is vital to a person, the traits he or she perceives in its practitioners are likely to rest upon stereotypes disseminated by popular literature, television, movies, advertising, and schools. The occasional role

incumbents one meets may lose social standing for deviating from the stereotype (Nilson, 1976), but incumbents actually do conform to the stereotype in some degree, copying life from art. In their public performances at least, the assembly line worker, lawyer, teacher, or physician feel some incentive to present themselves as their audiences expect them to do. The facets of an occupational stereotype commonly include race, ethnicity, sex, socioeconomic status, formality of appearance, speech, attractiveness, and often personality and character traits. Each of these stereotypic dimensions is stratified: in the dominant value system the most enhancing characteristics are a white skin, a WASP background, masculinity, upper class identification, a formal appearance, etcetera.

Each of these dimensions is itself a symbol evoking evaluative responses. Their meanings are reinforced because they are perceived as parts of constellations. Symbols are commonly assumed to imply others in a set (e.g., poor, black, messy, undependable), while other combinations are close to unthinkable.

Even children attribute a number of stereotypical non-class traits to their peers on the basis of class characteristics, whether or not the attributions are accurate (Warner, Mecker and Eells, 1949; Neugarten, 1946). Both children and adults perceive an attractive person to be warm, responsive, sensitive, strong, interesting, poised, sociable, of excellent character, and probably successful in a career--on the basis of physical appearance alone (Dion, Berscheid, and Walster, 1974; Dion and Berscheid, 1972). Once the class connotations of a symbol are learned through their inclusion in a constellation with a particular prestige value, it can be generalized to other contexts, coloring

their values. This mental process is only semi-conscious.

Personality is a particularly important aspect of an occupational stereotype. It locates an occupational image on the range between exalting and degrading. People as a rule compare and evaluate other persons and personifications rather than positions. They accept an implicit cultural theory of personality that associates particular traits with others in constellations that symbolize a level of social success, intelligence, and so on; and this attribution process is quite predictable (Bruner and Tagiuri, 1954; Bruner, Shapiro, and Tagiuri, 1958; Johnson, 1963; Wisher, 1960; Rosenberg, Nelson, and Vivekananthan, 1968). These processes operate especially rigidly to define the status of persons the perceiver does not know very well (Koltuv, 1962), which is also the case with occupational stereotypes. They also tend to group traits of the same desirability (Warr and Knapper, 1968). Inconsistencies in impression formation are dealt with in a number of ways (Hastorf, Schneider, and Polefka, 1970). But it is revealing that at least one study's subjects could not integrate the identity combination of "factory worker" and "intelligent" (Haire and Grunes, 1950).

Agencies of mass socialization strongly influence the values of symbols and the constellations in which they are typically found and learned, building upon traditional stereotypes so as to reinforce existing hierarchies and minimize resistance to them. In doing so they often link an occupational stereotype with an ethnic, racial, sexual, or class stereotype. Let us look at the symbolic forms built by mass socializing agents.

De Grazia (1962) notes that heroes and heroines in advertisements tend to have the symbolic trappings of the upper class, unless the ad is meant to be humorous. They are attractive, successful looking people resembling those in very high prestige occupations. Some ads, in fact, rely on the aura of professional authority.

Television and movie portrayals are usually more explicit with occupational identities. Incumbents of high prestige occupations--professionals and business leaders--are portrayed as white, nonethnic, male, upper or upper-middle class in status and culture, and physically attractive. They are usually dramatized in serious contexts where their impressive characters and exceptional intelligence guide them through difficult moral and technical decisions. They are sociable but thoughtful, ambitious but scrupulous, warm, interesting, and successful. Even more than that, they are capable of performing miracles in their area of expertise, if not beyond it. Dr. Welby is the kind of example audiences remember and accept as the archetype: human in affect and superhuman in accomplishment.

Incumbents of occupations in the middle of the prestige spectrum, such as police officers, detectives, salesmen, teachers, construction contractors, and nurses, are usually portrayed as more normal. Their stereotypes tend to represent a wider range of races, ethnicity, sex, class, attractiveness, intelligence, character, and personality, and they are not placed in a typically dramatic situations that prove their exceptional talents. While they are ordinarily attractive and respectable people, they are fair game for humor.

It is the incumbents of the lowest prestige occupations who are portrayed in the least enhancing light. Blue-collar workers of all

kinds are either the butt of comedy or the embodiment of ignorance or deviance. They are often ethnic, always lower class, sometimes immoral, generally unattractive, frequently bigoted, and not-too-bright. They are not superhuman; they are subhuman, often with personalities bent by a warp that evokes laughter or disgust.

Television and Hollywood movies are notorious for exploiting good-guy-bad-guy dichotomous symbols, and popular magazines reinforce the same images of occupations. More than thirty years ago, Berelson and Salter (1946) content analyzed 196 fiction pieces from eight leading popular magazines. Characters in professional and business occupations were overwhelmingly white, native, Protestant Americans who were successful, wealthy, and altruistic in their goals. Lower prestige jobs were typically populated by poor, unmotivated characters, with the stereotypic traits of foreigners or minorities. If they were upwardly mobile, a justification always explained away the exceptional case. Times had not greatly changed in twenty-five years. Kotok's (1971) follow-up analysis of 80 fiction pieces in the same or comparable magazines suggested that the highest prestige occupations were still predominantly Anglo-Saxon or Nordic and were stereotyped in the attractive character complex. At the lower end of the scale, characters were more mixed in their ethnicity, race, and ability to achieve.

Learned from teachers, counselors, or parents, occupational mythologies float around schools. The lore usually centers around the most prestigous occupations and the kind of idealized person (usually male) they require. There are stories about the difficulty of college,

the high flunk-out rates, the massive amounts of work, and the even stiffer demands made of students in medical school, law school, and graduate school; the student who shot himself over an exam, the broken marriages, the competitive stress, and the grueling days and nights of study. These myths may frighten some away, but their chief function is to exalt incumbents of particular occupations and professions.

Most people have no control over how their occupations are portrayed in the mass media and no formal recourse if they disapprove. But some of the prestigious occupations do: business leaders, by virtue of their commercial sponsorship, and the professions, by virtue of their organization. In advisory roles, the professions can help shape their own image. Less directly they are usually engaged in some form of public relations. They maintain contact with the media to encourage a good press, write favorable press releases, and occasionally obtain spots on radio and television broadcasts (Gilb, 1966). Professional organizations act as if they are aware of the importance of a highly respectable stereotype. They require members to conform to prevailing social codes and have in the past excluded blacks, women, Jews, and Catholics from professional schools and professional associations (Gilb, 1966).

In summary, an occupational identification implies a stereotypical image incorporating at least some of the following components: a race, an ethnicity, a sex, a class, a subculture, a level of attractiveness, and a kind of personality. These are cultural symbols carrying enduring and relatively uniform evaluative meanings. Part of the dominant value system, these meanings are conveyed through institutions of mass socialization. People often generalize from one trait to others stereotypically associated with it, usually with evaluative consistency.

The degree to which an idealized or degrading quality is imputed to an occupation reflects and reinforces its prestige level and rationalizes inequalities in influence and in rewards.

Language and Belief in Knowledge

It is critical to occupations in the highest prestige stratum that the public come to believe in their knowledge base on faith, just as the community accepted the expertise of the shaman. A belief-based legitimacy is possible only when key ideas, goals, and procedures of an occupation cannot be well specified and where the ambiguity of results of a procedure precludes outsiders from evaluating the occupational ideology or the competence of incumbents. Not only do these two conditions establish a belief rather than a reasoned basis for an occupation's legitimacy; they further protect the legitimacy of the knowledge base and the incumbents by discouraging or discrediting the critical evaluations of the audience. Outside observers must glean reassurance about an occupation's expertise from its language and trust an incumbent's competency on the basis of a dramaturgical role performance. We discuss the symbolic structure and function of the latter in the next section.

Public belief in an occupation's knowledge base is erected on a spongy foundation of esoteric language. Through language, knowledge is collected, transmitted, and preserved, and through language, outsiders' cognitions about an occupation's knowledge base are created. The vocabularly of low prestige occupations--farm labor, semi-skilled blue-collar and white-collar clerical occupations--is the most concrete

in the job spectrum. Its distinctive terms refer to solid, easily identifiable objects and clear-cut procedures: pruning, shaving, oiling, spraying, irrigating, canning, welding.

Often the terminology is also in popular usage and the procedures easy to comprehend. Proper decision-rules and procedures are reducible to programs. That the referents of terms are so readily observable, understandable, and common connotes that almost anyone can evaluate the work by unambiguous criteria. A label attached to an object suggests how that object is supposed to look or feel. A "business letter" is supposed to be flawlessly typed. A commercial "apple" is supposed to be unbruised and of a recognizable degree of ripeness. A "chocolate sundae" should contain ingredients that produce a certain taste and appearance. Otherwise these objects require a different label or a qualifier. The language of low status occupations reinforces the belief that interested outsiders can readily evaluate their products. The restricted language code characteristic of many occupations symbolizes the high degree to which their procedures are programmable and therefore the facility with which their incumbents can be evaluated, regardless of the validity of this belief. Under such circumstances, a belief that the practitioners of an occupation are privy to an esoteric source of knowledge is untenable, and a critical source of prestige is denied them.

The middle-level prestige occupations include independent farmers, the trades, and skilled white-collar and service occupations that are non-managerial or managerial on a very small scale and that receive some public exposure (e.g. nurse, teacher, newspaper columnist, reporter, radio announcer). The specialized language of these occupations,

especially those with a strong technological component, tends to be highly specific but less readily understood by outsiders, as their referents are less commonly known. Procedures are specified but do not imply as high a degree of uniformity and standardization as in the more mechanical occupations. There are a limited number of correct procedures and a larger number of wrong procedures. Methods for achieving desirable results are not completely programmed. There are occasional opportunities for limited innovation or a personal touch in deciding how to phrase an editorial opinion, how to sell an insurance policy, or how to wire a building, but personal discretion is restricted and is likely to become possible only after extensive experience with the available programs. While the untrained cannot easily practice these occupations, the public feels that it can pass judgment on the legitimacy of the knowledge base and the competency of incumbents. Mistakes are obvious even to outsiders. If the plumbing does not work, a house is poorly constructed, or a radio program is disrupted, it seems apparent to any observer that either the occupational technology is faulty or the incumbent has erred. Observers' judgments are based on the results of the performance, even when specific procedures are not well understood. What potential exists for belief-based legitimacy because of the esoteric components of occupational performance is therefore undermined by the unambiguous character of errors.

The professions, high level business management, and political occupations are accorded the most prestige. The distinctive and specialized language associated with those occupations and professions refers not to physical objects but to the unobservable or the unknown,

and the results of performances are ambiguous. Looking at language first, we can see that the symbols indigenous to these occupations name concepts and categories of people determined by problematic means, not readily observable or replicable by outsiders: diagnosis, detente, creativity, intelligence, representation, public interest, recession, growth, cancer, psychopathology, delinquent, incurable, evolution, atomic particle. The public cannot check the validity or reliability of professional judgments based upon such concepts, nor can laypersons propose competitive frameworks. The labels themselves convey the impression that they report something profound and well understood by professionals, all the more awesome and closed to doubt because it is unobservable to ordinary people. The very absence of clear proof becomes ground for belief. The professed commitments and ideals of these occupations are ordinarily taken for granted as motives: social welfare, the education of youth, democracy, progress, knowledge, health, and justice. Language legitimates techniques as therapeutic and non-coercive--help, advice, leadership--even though "recommendations" and decisions from these occupations are seldom negotiable.

Unlike other occupations, the outcomes of the performances of professionals and business and political leaders are ambiguous and are accepted as such. The degree to which an outcome is a success or a failure is poorly specified. It is not a reflection on either the occupation or a specific incumbent if a patient dies, an experiment yields unlikely results, students are uninspired, poverty is not reduced, the nation enters a war, or the economy stagflates. So many factors may influence an outcome that incumbents of these occupations cannot be held responsible for failure, though it is their

skills that account for successes. Incumbents attribute losses, setbacks, and less-than-desirable results to unforeseeable, uncontrollable, or inherently risky developments, seldom to individual error and never to the occupational ideology. The definition of poverty as an individual problem, of illness as a physiological concern, and of the economy as a correctable machine are unquestioned even in the face of conflicting evidence and conflicting ideologies.

Indeed, the chief result of the public's bemusement with the unintelligible nature of a high prestige occupation's procedures is its willingness to define success in terms of the application of such procedures, regardless of outcomes. The doctor's examinations and therapeutic techniques, the top manager's complex planning, the lawyer's learned citations, complex argumentation, and courtroom or office dramaturgy prove the incumbents' competence. Such a focus upon procedures rather than outcomes is characteristic of prestige judgments respecting any occupation that is believed to possess secret powers or esoteric knowledge. It is the source of reassurance that derives from ritual.

Even when an occupation can claim relatively few unambiguous successes, then, its legitimacy remains intact. To be accepted as beyond the kind of scrutiny to which less prestigious occupations are subject is a source of power and independence (Nilson and Minihan, 1976).

Role Relationships

Occupational legitimacy and prestige levels depend in part on just how the public "knows" an occupation and encounters its practitioners.

If there is no general awareness an occupation exists, its prestige level, understandably, is not high. The NORC prestige rating of nuclear physicist jumped several points between 1947 and 1963 as more people learned that there is such a specialty (Hodge, Siegel, and Rossi, 1964). Those occupations that deal with the public encounter people either as customers or as clients. In each case, occupational dramaturgy creates and reinforces prestige.

In the customer relationship, both parties understand that the seller of a good or service is motivated by profit. For a sale to take place, the customer must by sufficiently pleased to agree to a transaction; that is, wooed, but not necessarily satisfied after the sale. Much of the dramaturgy connotes wooing, deferring to the wants of the potential customer and displaying expertise about the particular object of sale, though the dramaturgy may be misleading. In the performance the customer may always be right, but he or she is dependent on the seller for information. At the same time, a customer quickly learns to be distrustful of the seller because of the profit motive; "Let the buyer beware." The customer may defer to the seller's apparent expertise--a decision which may be wise or foolish--but there is no legitimate authority and questions are expected. The customer may decide after the purchase that he or she is dissatisfied with the goods or service. Usually he or she will have some grounds accepted as adequate for judgment, and the evaluation will usually be regarded as valid. If a product does not work or a promise was broken, a layperson's complaint is taken as sufficiently knowledgeable. The incumbent may or may not act to fulfill the customer's demand, but the argument will take place on bureaucratic grounds (allegations about legal requirements,

timing of return, etcetera) rather than on the issue of relative expertise. If still displeased, the customer is considered justified in boycotting the seller or initiating legal action. The more dependent the seller on the customer, the more egalitarian is the customer relationship. Even with little dependency, the relationship is fairly equal unless the merchandise or service falls below customer expectations. Distrust balances claims of expertise; vulnerability balances wooing. The incumbent is not exalted nor is unquestioning faith demanded of the seller.

The power and status differential is much wider and more obvious in a clientele relationship. Occupations which deal with clients claim to be offering help, advice, or leadership: some kind of non-standardized service. The good faith of the incumbent must be assumed, and there is usually a code of ethics to buttress the assumption. Because the morality of the relationship is taken for granted, an incumbent implicitly demands to be believed on faith without cross-examination, whether the occupation be a profession (Freidson, 1970; Daniels, 1971) or a position of political leadership (Edelman, 1964). The incumbent defines what a mistake is (Hughes, 1958) and what the probabilities are of obtaining a number of outcomes more or less satisfying to the client. But client satisfaction, from the client's point of view, is not the primary object; money will change hands in almost any case. Since professionals and political leaders have exclusive, legally protected access to vital goods and services, clients have no alternatives outside of the occupational channels (Kriesberg, 1962; Freidson, 1970). It is difficult and costly for a client to sue a professional, as professionals are reluctant to testify against one another, and it

is almost impossible for voters to depose a political official. Satisfaction is not guaranteed, nor is the client always right. And the client might as well beware because ethical codes focus mostly on regulation of fees and internal competition and are sometimes used as defensive strategies against the criticisms of the public or the government (Daniels, 1971). In addition, they are often violated (Freidson, 1970; Carlin, 1966).

When seeing a professional or public official for service or representation, a client is in a vulnerable position: subordinate in power and usually status, expected to be cooperative and even non-critical with a professional, in an unfamiliar setting replete with technological or literary forms of esoterica and often with symbols of affluence and high status, unable to comprehend all that is said and done, and incapable of evaluating the incumbent's performance except by its closeness to type. This is no normal or comfortable situation for a self-respecting adult. Especially with a professional, a client has no supporting organization to buttress his or her status.

How are the setting and the authority to be interpreted as symbols? They carry ambivalent meaning: threatening and reassuring, alienating and demanding deference, inspiring both awe and hostility. But because there is usually no alternative course for obtaining the needed service or representation, the client must try to focus on what is propitious in the environment, minimizing threat and uncertainty and maximizing signs of trustworthiness and reassurance. A client gleans faith from the professional's dramaturgy of competence and of leadership; the gaps in experience and education which symbolize the distance between them, the dimly comprehensible display of jargon and specialized

knowledge, the professional or official manner. The client is encouraged to assume, much like children who read benevolence into their worlds, that these ambiguous gestures represent scientific breakthroughs, well tested theories and procedures, social justice, and an intelligent, well meaning, confident authority. Both the tension and the status gap are heightened when high prices are demanded for services, especially simple ones. The prevalent belief that one gets what one pays for may well strenghten the perception that more service is received than meets the eye.

The occupations that treat the public as clients rather than customers are among those with the highest prestige, usually even more prestigious than are major corporate heads.

The Compartmentalization of Hostility

Any symbol can evoke ambivalent emotional reactions, and is sure to do so when it appears in situations in which people's interests are in conflict. We have already alluded to evidence of a subordinate value system and a lower class value stretch. The normative ambivalence toward physicians has been considered by Gamson and Schuman (1963) and Cohn (1960). This subordinate value set coexists with the awe and respect for the dominant belief system that people agree to as members of a society. It is a confined rather than a confrontational counter-interpretation. George Wallace's popular phrase "pointy-headed bureaucrats," Spiro Agnew's "effete snobs," the "egghead" image that defeated Adlai Stevenson, the picture of the fat wealthy businessman with a cigar, the underlying suspicion of lawyers and politicians--all of these well known collective representations embody the public's

distrust and resentment of certain dominant occupational values. Bureaucratic rigidity, pretentious intellectuality, material piggishness, in-group secrecy, and manipulative ambition merit ridicule along with fear. They are not qualities characterizing "the common man," "regular people," or the respectable "hard-hat." They are really a caricature of the same symbols that induce deference, and they are developed without hard knowledge of the extent of political corruption, malpractice, professional secrecy, and economic waste.

Conclusions and Implications

As occupations ascend the prestige scale, the symbols associated with them tend more and more convincingly to reinforce a belief that their practitioners can draw upon an esoteric body of knowledge and personal talents that few can or do possess. These symbols may be located in the special language of occupations, the agents of mass socialization, and the role relationships incumbents have with outsiders. The more abstract and ambiguous the language, the more superhuman the practitioners and their challenges are portrayed, and the more exclusively the occupational dramaturgy is enacted with clients rather than customers, the more convincing those symbols are, and the greater the prestige an occupation will be given. People recognize that certain symbols are accorded high value in the culture and internalize such evaluations into their individual world views, even if alongside conflicting, subordinate value sets. The implications of people's dominant cognitions are best explicated by considering the systematic power and status linkages between high prestige and low prestige occupations that serve the same social functions.

Consider examples of the most prestigious occupations: justices of high appeals courts, psychiatrists, and top executives of large commercial and governmental organizations. Such occupations present themselves as able to cope with problems that occasion widespread and intense public concern but which laypersons know they cannot resolve themselves: handling controversial and ambiguous questions of policy or law; dealing with people who do not adjust to conventional social roles; making decisions in complex bureaucracies which carry farreaching consequences for clients, staff members, and the public welfare. Crime, deviance, and conflicts are recognized as long range threats to cherished social institutions and personal aspirations. So people need to believe that a combination of exceptional talent and specialized theoretical knowledge can cope with such threats confidently and effectively. This same combination of gnawing anxiety and of faith in talent and knowledge they do not understand underlies the status of other prestigious occupations as well.

These occupations are able to deal with sources of severe social strain because they serve largely to rationalize the inequalities that engender strain. Practitioners often define sectors of the nonelite as less deserving than others, as wayward, ignorant, or pathological today under the ideological auspices of science, just as they did yesterday in terms of divine will and natural law. In any case the inequalities are interpreted as necessary, inevitable, or equitable, a rarely challenged argument that ameliorates everyone's ambivalence and salves everyone's conscience, including those of the role occupants. The eagerness of mass publics to have stressful decisions settled without a public debate that

might encourage drastic social change is the support upon which many occupational functions and their high prestige rest.

High prestige occupations are "a-responsible" (Calabresi, 1976) in the sense that they need not provide reasons for their judgments in a form that comes to the attention of the general public or refutes alternative judgments. Executive and professional decisions at the highest level always involve a choice among competing precedents, values, and lines of reasoning that will remain in conflict; that phenomenon simply reflects the fact that these occupations deal with basic social strain. Opinions and reasons in effect tell a small circle of the informed which values and precedents are being followed; but the general public knows nothing of reasons and does not need to know. In the public eye, then, these occupations are important more for what they symbolize than for what they do, distinguishing them from most jobs, in which prestige depends upon the achievement of demonstrable results.

While the prestigious occupations provide legitimate justifications for inequalities, the associated occupations with lower prestige act rather than rationalize: they <u>enforce</u> unequal allocations of values. As enforcers of policy handed down from higher levels, nurses, orderlies, teachers, clerks, secretaries, foremen, and the police tend to be more visible than the prestigious policy makers. So the lower prestige occupations, which are more dependent on the success of their actions for their public evaluations, most often bear the blame for inefficiency, malfeasance, low productivity, and injustice. While the remote chief executive is hard to criticize for the esoteric abilities

and knowledge he or she is assumed to bring to bear in making high policy decisions, the low level functionaries with whom the public comes into immediate contact are ready targets for the resentments of all who feel rebuffed or dissatisfied. The psychiatrist who is "responsible" for basic policy is respected, rarely seen, and assumed to draw upon sources of intelligence laypersons cannot understand; the ward attendants and nurses who enforce the rules are susceptible to criticism, including the charge of failing to report accurately to the supervising psychiatrist and failing to carry out his or her benevolent plans.

Both high and low level occupations, then, serve psychological functions for the publics with whom they deal, and these functions are central to the degree of prestige accorded the respective occupations.

There is a curious ambiguity in this connection regarding the nature and the degree of the discretion exercised by different occupations. For the low level occupations, a wide range of discretion is routinely defined and perceived as "carrying out" policies handed down from the top. The policeman, the mine or factory inspector, and the psychiatric ward attendant make decisions every day that have the most direct and farreaching consequences for people's rights, independence, welfare, or income; but because their broad discretion is defined as the carrying out of policy, it is perceived as routine, (or, occasionally, illegitimate arbitrariness), and those who exercise it are accorded low prestige and low pay.

By the same token the decisions of high executives, high judges, and psychiatrists are defined, and therefore perceived, as discretion

allowed only to those whose special talents and knowledge assure that they will use it wisely and effectively. Yet the decisions of the exalted occupations are, in fact, largely shaped by the reports and selective information provided by their low level subordinates and in that sense not nearly as discretionary as their dramaturgical performance suggests. To the degree that they are not constrained by bureaucratic proceedings, they largely reflect the values of the role occupant and in that sense are indeed arbitrary. For both high and low level occupations, symbols that satisfy public fears and hopes therefore go far toward determining the level of occupational prestige.

That occupations conform to a fairly stable prestige hierarchy is to be expected in a stratified social structure. It is a more significant and a less obvious phenomenon that the various levels of the hierarchy systematically reinforce each other's high or low standing and also systematically legitimize inequalities in the allocation of values in the society as a whole. The explanation of how they serve these functions must rest on an analysis of what occupational language, actions, and settings symbolize: how they reflect the hopes, anxieties, and ambivalence that are inherent in a society that places a high value on equality and liberty but must convince people to accept wide disparities in occupational power and material affluence. The occupational prestige hierarchy serves this critical social and political function by offering a flexible, adaptable range of outlets for both the resentments and the idealizations of anxious people in such a way that even popular discontents become integrative.

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